

# Love's young dream... or nightmare

Sharon Marshall

Dreams can betray lots about our innermost desires and deepest anxieties. Here Sharon Marshall puts Ovid *Amores* 3.5, and the dream in that, into a broader literary context to gauge what it tells us about the poet and his poetry.

It is difficult to imagine a less flattering way of describing one's girlfriend than comparing her to a heifer! But this is exactly what Ovid does in *Amores* 3.5. In this poem, he recounts both a bizarre dream he had, as well as the explanation offered to him by a dream-reader. The dream goes something like this: he was seeking shade in a grassy meadow when a white cow appeared. When the cow's mate fell asleep, a crow swooped down and pecked her chest, leaving a black mark. The cow then left her mate and joined some other bulls grazing far off. Thank Jupiter for the dream-reader! The dream-reader explained that the cow represented Ovid's mistress, the bull Ovid himself, and the crow a brothel-keeper trying to corrupt the mistress. In short, the dream foretold her infidelity and abandonment of Ovid.

## Dreams in ancient literature

In Greek and Roman literature, fictional dreams often occupy a privileged place, offering the poet an opportunity for self-conscious reflection upon his literary project. Ennius, a poet writing during the Roman Republic and often considered the father of Roman poetry, began his historic epic, the *Annales*, with a dream. In Ennius' dream, Homer appeared to him and informed him that his own soul (after a brief incarnation as a peacock) had now been born into Ennius. Through this dream, Ennius reveals the magnitude of his poetic mission and suggests that the *Annales* represents not so much an imitation of the work of his Greek predecessor, as the rebirth of epic in Roman form.

Roman love elegy is no exception to this tendency for dreams to herald moments of poetic self-reflection. Propertius, one of Ovid's elegiac predecessors, includes a number of dreams within his love elegies that seem to reflect upon the nature of his poetic project, the

most explicit of which can be found in poem 3.3. Here Propertius dreams that he is about to drink from the same waters that inspired Ennius in the writing of his historical epic, only for the god Apollo to stop him. Instead, Apollo leads him to the cave of the Muses where Calliope, the muse of epic poetry, reminds him that his concern is not for the martial themes of epic, but love.

Elsewhere in Propertius' poems we find dreams that are less obviously about the poet as poet than about the relationship between the poet-lover and his mistress. One such poem, 2.26, is particularly useful in helping us understand Ovid's *Amores* 3.5. Both poems reveal anxieties about their mistress's fidelity, but both also reveal anxieties about their control over their poetry.

## Propertius 2.26

In poem 2.26, Propertius recounts a dream he had in which his lover Cynthia was drowning at sea after a shipwreck and he attempted to save her. Propertius provides no explicit interpretation of the dream, but at the beginning of the poem we are offered a clue when the drowning Cynthia confesses to Propertius the lies that she has told him (2.26.3). Throughout both books one and two (including 1.15, 1.16, 2.5, 2.8, 2.9), Propertius reveals the pain he has endured as a result of Cynthia's dishonesty. Here, the subject clearly weighs on his mind, even in his sleep, as he imagines Cynthia finally confessing to all her deception in her dying moments. Propertius' anxieties about Cynthia's duplicity are compounded by his jealousy, and even as she flounders at sea, he reveals his concern for the allure she possesses to other men, imagining that, if the sea-god Glaucus had seen Cynthia's eyes, he would have taken her for himself and turned her into a sea nymph (2.26.13–14).

In lines 7–8 of the poem, uncertain of

his beloved's fate, Propertius contemplates the possibility of commemorating her in poetry, giving her name to a body of water after her death, like the maiden Helle who fell from a ram into the Hellespont and gave the sea her name. Confronted with losing Cynthia, Propertius seeks consolation in the prospect of being able to ensure her lasting renown, but still prays to Neptune and other gods of the sea to save her. As she drowns, Cynthia calls out Propertius' name again and again and in so doing acknowledges his power to either rescue her through the power of his prayers, or preserve her memory through the power of his poetry.

In the end, however, like Propertius' anxieties about Cynthia's fidelity, anxieties about his power to save her also begin to creep in. Just as Propertius is about to swim to her rescue, he imagines a dolphin coming to her aid, recalling the myth of Arion the lyre player who was saved from drowning by a dolphin drawn to his music. Propertius imagines the very same dolphin, but, significantly, refers to it not as the one that saved Arion, but the one that saved Arion's lyre. Like Arion's lyre, Propertius seems to suggest that Cynthia is his instrument, that she is what makes his poetry possible. His fear is that she is about to be carried away, beyond his reach, perhaps into the hands of another. Ultimately, Propertius' fears seem to be confirmed, for just as he is about to jump from the cliff, he awakes from the dream in terror and is unable to rescue her. He then imagines having the power to preserve Cynthia by commemorating her in his poetry, but ultimately questions the commemorative power of poetry and whether he will be able to hang on to her that way either. These anxieties about his control over mistress and poetry are key, I would suggest, to understanding Ovid's *Amores* 3.5.

## Ovid, *Amores* 3.5

Ovid's dream, like Propertius', also arises from his anxieties about the fidelity of his mistress. We hardly need the dream reader's interpretation to explain the significance because, as with Propertius'

Cynthia, Corinna's infidelity comes as no surprise; we have heard it all before. But whereas Propertius leaves it to the reader to work out the significance, Ovid, it seems, invites us to look closely at the dream-reader's interpretation and read it against our own.

The professional interpretation of the dream seems to make perfect sense. But it is significant that our supposed expert does not offer explanations for all of the details in the dream, failing to unpack its full symbolic potential. In lines 17–20, for example, the bull chews slowly on the cud, then falls asleep on the ground, but the dream-reader fails to see any significance here and omits the detail in his explanation. The attentive reader, however, might think back to *Amores* 1.5, where Ovid encourages Corinna to ply her husband with wine at a dinner party so that, once he has fallen asleep in a drunken stupor, the lovers might have time together (1.5.17–20). The anxiety that manifests itself in Ovid's dream, then, is that he himself is now deceived as Corinna sleeps with other men.

Similarly, the dream-reader fails to explain the significance of the comparison of the whiteness of the cow in line 10 to fresh snow or milk. He does tell us that the white colour of the cow is 'appropriate for a girl', suggesting, albeit rather economically, that before she is corrupted by the brothel-keeper, the girl is pure. What the dream-reader misses, however, is Ovid's marked insistence on freshness: the snow has only just fallen and the milk is still frothy, having come straight from a sheep. What both of these suggest is just how quickly Corinna has been corrupted; it seems to Ovid only a moment ago that she, too, seemed pure in his eyes.

Failing to recognise and explain the significance of these details, the interpreter is also mistaken in others. In his explanation of the crow jabbing at the cow's breast, the dream-reader explains: 'An old woman, a brothel-keeper, will influence the mind of your mistress' (3.5.40). Although he interprets the whole scene as a portent of the future, the alert reader knows that this has already happened as far back as *Amores* 1.8, in which, eavesdropping behind closed doors, Ovid is forced to endure a brothel-keeper named Dipsas attempting to encourage Corinna to sleep with men who will give her money and gifts, not a poet who will shower her only with new poems. The dream-reader fails to see that Ovid's dream represents anxieties that are based upon what he has already experienced.

Confronted with the shortcomings of the professional dream-reader, the reader is invited to think carefully about their own interpretation of the dream and the significance of the details. In addition, Ovid invites the reader to consider the

process of interpretation in itself and how delicate a process that is, prone to omission and perhaps even failure. Ovid's dream presents us with a scenario we are able to understand from our knowledge of the *Amores* as a whole and his narrative of his relationship with Corinna, but he also presents us with an interpretation of that scenario that is both incomplete and, when it comes to the brothel-keeper's interference, also misguided. In so doing, like Propertius, Ovid reveals a two-fold anxiety about control as a lover and as a poet. Once his poetry is made public and is open to the instability of interpretation, Ovid is no more in control of it than he is of his wayward mistress.

*Sharon Marshall teaches at Exeter University where she works on Latin literature and its reception. She has lots of dreams but was wise enough not to share them with us.*